Intercultural Education

Extending reading research with a focus on cultural understanding and research on intercultural communication: an empirical investigation in Argentina

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The work presented here is an empirical study of how advanced learners of English as a foreign language in Argentina access and understand the culture-specific dimensions of literary narrative texts. It has three purposes. First, to extend research into reading in a foreign language to take account of the culture-specific content of texts. Second, to extend the focus of research on intercultural communication to include the analysis of reading processes. Finally, to introduce an approach to the analysis of the cultural dimension of the reading process using a new model of levels of cultural understanding. It is argued that cultural understanding goes beyond the quantification of prior knowledge or background knowledge in the form of idea units as evidence of the comprehension process. In this sense, the proposed model succeeds in portraying a more detailed picture of cultural understanding in this setting.

Keywords: cultural understanding; English as a Foreign Language (EFL) reading; model of cultural understanding

Introduction

The work presented here is an empirical study of how advanced learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) access and understand the culture-specific dimensions of literary narrative texts. It has three purposes. First, to extend research into reading in a foreign language to take account of the culture-specific content of texts. Second, to extend the focus of research on intercultural communication to include the analysis of reading processes. Finally, to introduce an approach to the analysis of the cultural dimension of the reading process using a new model of levels of cultural understanding. The study is framed within an understanding of the complexity of reader response and its social situatedness. The elusiveness of the notion of culture, as well as the difficulty of defining it, is also taken into account. It is acknowledged that the process of interpretation is complex due to the overlapping factors involved such as socio-economic and cultural factors, prior content knowledge and prior experience with texts. The next section will therefore review different bodies of previous research.

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Literature review

Research into reading that takes account of the culture-specific content of texts

The body of research into reading (in both first and second/foreign languages) that takes account of the culture-specific content of texts is, in general, framed within schema theories. A schema is an abstract knowledge structure that represents generic concepts stored in memory (Anderson and Pearson 1984; Rumelhart and Ortony 1977) and it is useful because it allows readers to anticipate and predict, or in other words, it creates patterns of expectations. In reading research, the usual approach taken is to observe the connections between the schemata presupposed by a text and the schemata that readers activate (or fail to activate) when interpreting that text. Most of the empirical investigations of reading and schemata carried out by cognitive scientists in the 1970s and 1980s were experiments done in laboratories, in dissociation from the social and cultural world (Anderson 1977; Anderson and Pearson 1984; Bransford and Johnson 1972, 1973; Rumelhart 1975, 1980). This meant that the cultural dimension of reading was investigated without considering the cultural context. However, some schema theorists and researchers did take social and cultural factors into account. For instance, Lipson (1983), Steffensen, Joag-Dev, and Anderson (1979), Reynolds et al. (1982), Harris et al. (1988), Pritchard (1990) and Anderson (2004, study undertaken in 1984) investigated the importance of analysing schemata of background knowledge and their role in successful comprehension, thus acknowledging the power of social and cultural factors in reading comprehension. Taken together, these studies have shown that readers have a better understanding and recall of texts from their own cultural background, i.e. texts for which they possess a relevant or appropriate culture-specific content schema.

However, even in these investigations, there is the problem that they use a limited conception of culture. Culture is interpreted as a variable in the analysis of significant factors, rather than as a constituent of the representations or schemata which readers bring to the reading process. For example, some studies present the cultural dimension as only one aspect of an individual's 'integrated cultural identities' (Maloof, Rubin, and Miller 2006, 255; also Dunnett, Dubin, and Lezberg 1986; Kabakchy 1978), namely race, ethnicity or nationality (occasionally religion) in isolation.

These studies also tend to be problematic methodologically, using one research instrument, the free recall protocol, for the investigation of the comprehension process (Brantmeier 2003; Lipson 1983; Reynolds et al. 1982; Rice 1980; Sharifian, Rochecouste, and Malcolm 2004; Steffensen, Joag-Dev, and Anderson 1979). In a recall protocol, participants are told to read a text and then recall it in writing as closely as possible. For purposes of analysis, the text is divided into idea units, which are then identified and quantified in the recall protocols that participants produce. The more idea units present in a recall, the more a reader is said to have comprehended the text in question. From this perspective, there is a mismatch between what the studies explicitly aim to investigate (i.e. different aspects of comprehension) and the main instrument chosen, namely the free recall protocol. The mismatch stems from the focus on the final product of what has been understood as revealed by the recall protocol – rather than the comprehension process itself – with a specific interest in how much has been remembered from a text, or in other words, the

amount of understanding. However, as Chang (2006, 522) puts it, 'comprehension does not necessarily equate with remembering'.

Research on intercultural communication and literature

The current research on intercultural education stresses key aspects that are relevant to the investigation reported in this article such as a dynamic conception of culture (Dietz and Mateos Cortés 2012; Gibson and Grant 2012), the emphasis on comparative perspectives (Dietz and Mateos Cortés 2012; Wang 2011), the contact with cultures and languages (different from one's own) through different means (such as study abroad, the internationalization of education and online projects) (Corriero and O'Doherty 2013; Trede, Bowles, and Bridges 2013; Trilokekar and Rasmi 2011; Wang 2011), and the importance of the intercultural dimension of education (Bohlin 2013; Corriero and O'Doherty 2013; Dietz and Mateos Cortés 2012; Perry and Southwell 2011; Trede, Bowles, and Bridges 2013), among others. This article also draws on work that argues for the central role of language education (Baraldi 2012; Kramsch 1995; Porto 2013a), and literature in particular, in allowing this contact with otherness, especially in contexts where the options for the internationalization of education are limited for different reasons (such as financial reasons and geographical distance, as in the Argentinean context). The role of literature is significant also in classroom contexts, and this is something that needs to be contrasted with the naturalistic setting of study abroad options for instance.

More specifically, some research on intercultural communication has focused on the use of literature for intercultural understanding, for example, in work by Bredella (2000, 2003), Bredella and Delanoy (1996), Burwitz Melzer (2001), Delanoy (1993) and Gonçalves Matos (2005). Literature becomes a central element in this research because it provides the 'imaginative leap that will enable learners to imagine cultures different from their own' (Kramsch 1995, 85) and can therefore 'be used to develop an understanding of otherness' (Burwitz Melzer 2001, 29). Allington and Swann (2009), Bredella (2000, 2003), Burwitz Melzer (2001), Byrnes (2008), Carter (2010), Jeffries (2001), Kramsch (1995), Gonçalves Matos (2005) and others have argued for a view of the integration of language, culture and literature as a tripod.

This line of research has explored reading processes, and in particular the cultural dimension of reading only to the extent that they were necessary to investigate the understanding of otherness through literature; it has not focused on the reading process as such. This article makes a contribution in this respect.

The rationale for the integration of language, culture and literature to foster intercultural understanding is related to some characteristics of literary texts. For instance, literary texts allow readers to bring to the surface the feelings and thoughts that guide the values and beliefs of the characters and encourage awareness of them (Ooka Pang et al. 1998). The structural elements of stories and their organization are related to their functioning in a certain culture. As Bruner (2002) explains, stories transform individual experience in collective experience and allow the reading of the minds of others by facilitating access to the intentions and mental states of characters. This is why stories cultivate personal and intercultural understanding through the exploration of what motivates characters, how different characters

interact, and how their objectives and ways of reaching them conflict, for instance (Kamberelis and Bovino 1999).

Furthermore, stories are always told from a particular perspective or standpoint, which allows for intercultural understanding because the uncovering of a certain perspective simultaneously reveals another one (Bruner 2002). Narratives allow readers to become aware of alternative perspectives and to decentre their own thinking by placing themselves in somebody else's shoes and therefore to understand the reality of this other. In this sense, narratives are powerful because they help readers define themselves, build bridges towards others by offering contrasts with different perspectives (Boyle and Peregoy 1998; Joseph 2005) and understand different views of reality (Burwitz Melzer 2001). The cultural information present in almost all the narrative elements facilitates access to information rich in cultural details (Harris 1999; Yokota 1998), which give life to a short story and offer readers a window on the life of the culture they are reading about (Mariane 2007; Yokota 1998). Cultural details appear in the world models presented, in what characters do and say, in the problems that take place and the suggested solutions. Following Bruner (2002, 31), 'narration is constitutive of cultural life'. Stories show cultural patterns as they delineate what is expected of the members of a given culture, but they also show the transgression of the norm and thus make both memorable: the norm and the deviation. In this respect, the argument here is that the narrative genre allows for the openness of mind that is necessary for intercultural understanding to take place.

The advantages of literature for the development of an understanding of otherness have been pointed out by scholars from other disciplines. For instance, in psychology, Allport, in a discussion of prejudice, argues that one of the methods that may be effective in the treatment of prejudice is the 'method of vicarious experience' (Allport 1954, 523), which involves exposing individuals to works of literature in order to foster the identification with members of minority exogroups. According to the author, literary fiction is a particularly good option in intercultural programmes.

Finally, what the foregoing means, too, is that narratives are particularly good vehicles for making the strange familiar. This process of becoming familiar with the different, the peculiar, the exotic, is necessary for intercultural understanding to take place. Narratives offer the challenge of finding new problems, i.e. they show readers a reality that they already know, but with a strangeness that makes them see what used to be familiar through new eyes (Moreiras 1991). Something different from what the reader expects always happens. Narratives allow for new ways of solving problems and looking at reality. This requires imagination, something that the narrative genre fosters, in particular in children's and youth's literature in which the images that accompany the texts are significant (Arizpe 2001; Pope Edwards and Mayo Willis 2000). The integration of textual and visual information is related to the comprehension, integration and appreciation of reading material (Pope Edwards and Mayo Willis 2000; Sadoski and Paivio 2004) and contributes to the process of strangeness in which events challenge what readers expect. This opportunity of openness to other alternatives, to other possibilities, fosters intercultural understanding.

This study

The study described here attempts to bring together, and extend, these areas of research. It does so in two ways. First, regarding reading research with a focus on the cultural content of texts, it abandons the quantification of idea units in a free recall protocol as a measure of comprehension and proposes instead the use of a model with levels of cultural understanding as a means of analysis. Second, regarding research on intercultural communication, this study uses literary texts to investigate cultural understanding at the point where the focus is on the reading process. It is also important to mention that most of the reading research referred to earlier with its focus on the cultural content of texts has used extremely short texts which are not in general literary. For example, Steffensen, Joag-Dev, and Anderson (1979) use letters of between 127 and 136 idea units. Rice (1980) and Hammadou (1991) resort to texts of between 250 and 500 words, and Sharifian, Rochecouste, and Malcolm (2004) vary between one paragraph and transcribed oral conversations of between 10 and 40 lines. Allington and Swann (2009, 224) refer to these texts as 'bibliographically idiosyncratic texts (or 'textoids')'. By contrast, in the study reported here, the prompt texts are unmodified extracts from literary works, 1–3 pages long, i.e. they are considerably longer than the texts used in previous research.

I have already referred to the rationale for the use of authentic literary narrative texts in this study. I might add here that it also includes 'the primary authenticity of literary texts and [of] the fact that more imaginative and representational uses of language could be embedded alongside more referentially utilitarian output' (Carter 2010, 116). This authenticity contributes to the high ecological validity of the investigation because 'narratives enable an investigation of contextualized language use' (van Hell et al. 2003, 299). The advantages which have been shown for literature in the development of an understanding of otherness (Bredella 2000, 2003; Gonçalves Matos 2005) in naturally occurring (literary) reading or 'ordinary reading' in a natural setting (Allington and Swann 2009, 224) are also important here.

Although, as we have seen, reading comprehension in native and foreign languages contexts has been studied for years in different disciplines, empirical studies investigating cultural understanding in EFL reading in Latin America are scarce and therefore this study constitutes a new departure. Several studies have used populations with different cultural backgrounds and ages, but the Latin American perspective and the 18–22 age group tend not to be represented. For instance, adults from Indian and American backgrounds participated in Steffensen, Joag-Dev, and Anderson's study (1979). Hollingsworth and Reutzel (1990) and Lipson (1983) worked with American children. Sharifian, Rochecouste, and Malcolm (2004) worked with adult participants who were educators. Presumably, their level of cultural awareness and their ability to understand otherness might be thought to be higher owing to this condition. Other studies have involved college readers but have used expository rather than literary narrative texts (Alderson and Urquhart 1988; Brantmeier 2005; Mannes 1994). Lipson (1983) also foregrounded religious background as participants were children with Catholic and Jewish affiliations. In the study reported here, information about religion was considered to be relevant and was therefore targeted through one specific question in the biographical question-

naire, but the study did not intend to make these religious identifications central. Abu-Rabia (1996, 1998) worked with Arab students in Israel, aged 14–15.

A model of cultural understanding

The model of understanding proposed here as a tool for analysis is a six-stage model which attempts to describe the different ways in which learners approach cultural issues during the reading of texts, in this case literary texts. It is initially a conceptual, non-empirical model derived from what we know about what happens psychologically when people meet otherness (in this case through reading) and what we think *ought* to happen i.e. is desirable from a humanistic viewpoint when people meet otherness (such as perspective change). The model emphasizes the centrality of cultural understanding as a fluid process on a continuum from cultural familiarity to unfamiliarity. In this sense, it departs from the conception of cultural understanding as a quantification of idea units present (or absent) in a recall protocol. Underlying this model is a dynamic conception of culture, that emphasizes processes rather than facts, that distances itself from monolithic and static perspectives and that stresses cultural understanding as a social construction: 'the objectives that are to be achieved in intercultural understanding involve processes rather than facts' (Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey 2002, 27; Perry and Southwell 2011; Porto 2013b).

Other models exist in the literature and Perry and Southwell (2011) offer a useful historical description for the novice reader. Some have been designed for the teaching and learning of language and culture in an integrated way, and are for the most part conceptual (Byram 1997; Byram and Morgan 1994; Crawford-Lange and Lange 1984; Kramsch 1993, 1998; Paige et al. 2003; Seelye 1981, 1994). A different kind of model proposed by Bennett (1993, 1998, 2009) and widely quoted in research on interaction with otherness is the Intercultural Development Model, which describes the stages people go through when confronted with otherness and conceptualizes intercultural competence as a developmental process in which affective, behavioural and cognitive factors interplay.

The model proposed here draws from several previous models. For instance, with Bennett's model, it shares the central role of the theoretical notion of 'difference' (i.e. exploring otherness through processes of comparing and contrasting) as well as the emphasis on the significance of attitudes in cultural understanding. The focus on perceptions that Kramsch (1993) explores is pivotal here too, because her model foregrounds the fact that cultural understanding is a process centred not so much on the discovery of the factual and objective characteristics of another culture (referred to as C2 or Culture 2 in the model below), but rather on the exploration of how other cultures relate to one's own (referred to as C1 or Culture 1), in particular through the discovery of insider and outsider perspectives on a given culture. Finally, from Byram's (1997, 2009) model of Intercultural Competence, the model proposed here highlights the emphasis on skills and attitudes (not only knowledge) as well as the notion of critical cultural awareness. The importance of attitudes (including prejudice and stereotyping) is something that has also been highlighted in the literature on intercultural education as in Ljujic (2011).

The model is summarized in the following chart. A full description can be found in Porto (2013b).

Model of Cultural Understanding during English as a foreign language reading

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Level 0. Erratic perception or omission of cultural aspects.
In this level, readers may fail to perceive cultural aspects, which leads to their omission; or they may perceive them erratically, either accepting or rejecting them.
Level 1. Perception/identification of cultural differences. Access to levels 2, 3, 4 and 5.
This level involves the perception of cultural differences, with the identification of the different, exciting, attractive, etc. elements of a given culture. The perception of cultural differences through comparison, confrontation and contrast works as a bridge for the other stages in the model (levels 2, 3, 4 and 5). It is accessed through the identification of key vocabulary.
Level 2. Identification of own values and ideas. Identification of the cultural assumptions behind one's own culture (insider perspective).
Comprehending culture C1 (i.e. one's own culture) from an insider perspective means analysing one's behaviours, values, ideas, etc. in the light of one's cultural norms. Given its familiarity, observing one's cultural reality is not easy. The access to this level requires guidance (e.g. the teacher's) as in general, access is accompanied by ethnocentric positions and a lack of cultural sensibility.
Level 3. Perception of culture C2 (another culture) from one's own frame of reference (one's culture or C1) (outsider perspective). Stereotyped views of culture C2.
This level involves comprehending culture C2 from an outsider perspective and requires becoming aware of how the behaviours, values and ideas of others are interpreted from the perspective of one's own cultural frame of reference. This represents an observer perspective.
Level 4. Perception of culture C2 from the frame of reference of members of culture C2 (insider perspective).
This stage involves the comprehension of culture C2 from an insider perspective. How the members of another culture behave and what values they have is interpreted in the light of their own cultural norms.
Level 5. Perception of culture C1 from the perspective of culture C2 (outsider perspective).
This means apprehending culture C1 from an outsider perspective. This level involves awareness of how one's own behaviour, values and ideas are seen through the eyes of the members of other cultures.

The model attempts to capture the double angle of vision (us-them) achieved through imagination, attributing importance to both aspects: the capacity of movement in and out of different perceptions, and the significant role of imagination in intercultural understanding. Following Kramsch (1993), this double vision needs to be stretched to reach multiple perspectives, and in fact the model can be thought of as a vehicle for the creation of a third space in intercultural understanding, a space that foregrounds the fluid, the relative and the unstable. Exploring multiple perspectives thus posits a dynamic conception of culture, or culture as 'negotiation' (Genetsch 2007, 26).

Methodology

The study reported here investigates how a group of advanced learners of English in Argentina comprehend the culture-specific content of literary texts drawn from contexts which are more and less familiar to them. The research question is:

What processes, techniques and behaviours do EFL college readers in this setting use to comprehend the cultural content of literary narrative texts during and after reading?

This study's design is based on the hypothesis that cultural understanding depends *inter alia* on three key factors: linguistic competence, literary competence and cultural competence. Taking into consideration the complexity of studying comprehension, in particular the fact that 'almost 50% of the variability remains unexplained' (Sharp 2002, 101; a view taken also by others such as Bernhardt 1991 and Smith-Maddox 1998) it was decided to focus on cultural competence with the assumption that linguistic and literary competence are highly developed among the particular participants involved. Participants had reached level C1 in the *Common European Framework of Reference*, which allowed me to assume that language in the type of text used in the research was unproblematic for them. This fact notwithstanding, the study is consistent with previous research in providing all instructions in the first language (L1), Spanish, and requiring that all tasks be performed in the L1 (Chang 2006; Yu 2008). With respect to literary competence, the participants read and respond to literary narrative texts in all Language and Literature courses throughout the five-year programme for future teachers and the five-year programme for future translators from which they were selected.

Participants

The participants (age range 18–22) were 10 future teachers and/or translators of English (nine female and one male) whose first language is Spanish and who were in their 3rd year of undergraduate studies at *Universidad Nacional de La Plata* in La Plata, Argentina. This is a prestigious, state, access-for-all university in a developing country. The participants, who volunteered to join the research, were chosen on the basis of their previous performance on the language and literature courses at the university. They received information about the research project and signed a consent form to indicate their understanding and their permission for the data to be use anonymously. In addition to demographic information, participants completed a questionnaire about their reading habits in Spanish and another about their reading habits in English.

Reading materials

Three literary narrative texts were chosen with a common theme (Christmas celebrations). They involved different perspectives (insider, outsider and hybrid), and different cultural loads (relatively culturally familiar, culturally distant and totally culturally remote); this was consistent with Sharifian, Rochecouste, and Malcolm's (2004) concept of a continuum in varying degrees of familiarity with cultural schemata.

One prompt text (a selection from *Mi planta de naranja-lima – My sweet orange tree* – Vasconcelos 1971, 39–43) presents a Brazilian context, a relatively close cultural reality familiar to the participants, with an insider perspective, a narrator who participates in the celebration described and is a member of the cultural group the text presents. This text is in Spanish, the native language of the participants. The fragment describes Christmas as experienced by an extremely poor family, narrated

through the eyes of Zezé, a five-year-old child who still hopes for change. Another text, written in English, portrays a different cultural reality from the participants', also with an insider perspective (fragment from *Cat's Eye*, Atwood 1998, 137–140). It describes the Christmas celebration of a Canadian family. Mr. Banerji is a guest in the celebration, invited by the father, a professor of biology. Banerji is a student from India. The narrator is Elaine, the professor's daughter, who is a child. The third text, also in English, presents a very distant cultural reality as it describes a Christmas celebration in a Native American context with an outsider perspective, a narrator who participates in the celebration described but is not a member of the culture represented in the text (a fragment from *Desert Wife,* Faunce 1961, 173–181). It describes a Christmas celebration in one of the native communities in the United States. The topics of otherness, difference and strangeness are pervasive in the fragment, since the Navajos are introduced to an occidental Christmas celebration by an American couple who are living on the Indian reservation. Hilda's view, the woman in the white couple, is present throughout the whole fragment as the narrator's voice and she positions herself as observer of the Navajos and their habits, customs, behaviours, values and conceptions, among other aspects.

Research instruments

The participants were asked in a questionnaire about any prior knowledge of the cultural content they were about to encounter in the three fragments and the sources of such knowledge (TV, books, etc.).

Then, for each text, data were collected from participants in the following forms:

(a) the text underlined with difficult or confusing parts as the participants perceived them during reading, together with a brief explanation of such difficulties in note form in the text itself;
(b) an immediate written reflection log (retrospective self-observation) referring to the cultural aspects in the text and the comprehension difficulties found;
(c) a reading response task;
(d) a visual representation task; and
(e) a delayed interview to focus on issues which emerged from the analysis of c) and d).

The underlined text, reflection log and interview were explicitly included in this research design in order to explore the *process* of reading, or in other words, how these readers approached the cultural content of these texts *during* the reading itself.

The reading response task is a format adapted from Ollmann (1996), which allows for the emergence of idiosyncratic responses to a text. It involves recalling and summarizing, but it goes beyond that by encouraging imaginative and personal responses as well.

The visual representation task is the representation of textual content including the combination of words, phrases and/or sentences with visual information in different formats of varying complexity chosen by the readers as they wished (such as charts, tables, graphs, grids, mind maps, flowcharts, diagrams, drawings and the

like). One of the reasons for the inclusion of this mode of response as a research instrument is its simplicity and power of representation (Derrida 1994) as well as its usefulness to capture emotional responses in reading, an area in which schema theories have weaknesses (Sadoski and Paivio 2004). The kind of personal response to texts which the visual representation allows caters for the affective dimension involved in responses to literary texts such as those used in this study, in particular imagery and emotion. Widdowson (2003, 89) points out a gap that exists in this area: 'One area of linguistic experience, however, continues to be neglected, namely the imaginative and individual exploration of meaning potential that is characteristic of literature'.

As stated above, it was deemed necessary to go beyond the recall instruments used previously, because a skilled reader can, with the appropriate knowledge of text structure, recall and summarize a text but have little understanding of the cultural dimension behind it. To produce a reading response task and a visual representation task on the other hand, recalling and summarizing alone are not enough. The participants had to make sense of the cultural cues as well as the culturally situated information in the fragments, relate them to their own cultural parameters, and in so doing they brought in their experiences, knowledge and background to their interpretation. As the instructions did not require them to recall every bit of the texts (in contrast to the recall protocol), the participants were free to respond to particular aspects that attracted their attention. They were not committed to reflecting the views of the writer or the narrator in each text.

Individual delayed interviews, which took place in Spanish one week after the reading of each text, were conducted to allow participants to explain, reflect and comment upon their interpretations in each mode of response. Participants had all their productions as well as the prompt texts with them at the time of interviewing.

Data analysis

The *Model of Cultural Understanding* was used in data analysis. The initial plan was to assign at least two different levels in the model to each reading response and visual representation task. First, the choice would be between levels 0 and 1 exclusively. These levels are critical because they involve the perception, or lack of perception, of cultural elements (cultural details, similarities, differences, always on the basis of the reader's own culture). The perception of the different, exciting and attractive elements of a given culture is possible through the identification of key vocabulary and works as a bridge for stages 2, 3, 4 and 5 in the model. Second, responses would be allocated to one of levels 2, 3, 4 and 5. However, in the actual process of data analysis, what happened was that the participants in fact were seen to slip backwards and forwards along the continuum of this model, not only among the written tasks they produced, but also at different points in the same task. This means that it was possible to observe characteristics of all the levels in this model in all the tasks that the participants produced.

Results

Each individual's data were examined using the model but the findings presented here are based on analyses of the corpus of all data types from the whole group. For reasons of space, only two tasks – the visual representation and the follow-up interview – will be reported in detail here after an initial overview.

Overall, the key conclusion is that cultural understanding is a *fluid process* on a *continuum* of cultural familiarity and unfamiliarity. This means that in each task, the participants slipped backwards and forwards along the continuum of the model with levels of understanding. This suggests that the process of cultural understanding cannot be said to be composed of stable, independent and discrete elements, processes or stages.

The confrontation with the values and ideas present in the perspectives of others in the prompt texts favoured a process of decentering or critical distancing from their own perspective. The following table (Table 1) shows the levels in the model assigned to reading response, visual representation and interview. Level 1 was pervasive in both the reading responses and the visual representations of all texts, and was confirmed by the interviews, where all participants identified cultural elements from the fragments. Level 3, which represents a stereotyped approach to otherness, was present in three readers in all texts. Globally, the participants' responses were allocated between levels 4 and 5, which reflect the highest levels of cultural understanding.

Let us now take a visual representation by Lula (pseudonym) based on *Cat's Eye* (Atwood 1998, 137–140). As indicated above, the narrator is Elaine, the professor's daughter, who is a child. Readers notice cultural tension since they perceive the visitor feels awkward in a context where he does not understand the cultural meaning of the celebration and can only fully interact in conversation when he and his professor, the father of the family, use scientific language.

It should be recalled that data were produced in the first language, Spanish. I include here convenience translations into English. These translations were voluntarily undertaken by the participants themselves immediately after the closure of data collection (including the interviews). In the interview transcripts, I use initials to identify speakers (L for Lula and M for myself, the interviewer). I italicize the evidence for the argument or point I wish to make in each case. I use bold to illustrate other specific aspects and signal this explicitly.

Lula's visual representation begins with the notion of 'interculturality', highlighted with borders, from where the differences between Banerji and the family are identified. These are differences in beliefs, customs and worldviews (*Diferentes creencias, diferentes costumbres, diferentes cosmovisiones; Different beliefs, different customs, different cosmovisions*). This identification of differences illustrates level 1 in the *Model of Cultural Understanding*. The description of a typical Christmas dinner in the United States brings about a stereotyped vision of this celebration in this context, with the family gathering, the turkey and the abundance of food (*Cena navideña típica: familia reunida, pavo, mucha comida; Typical Christmas dinner: family reunion, turkey, a lot of food*). This is an instance of level 3 in the model, a stereotyped vision of another culture, from an outsider perspective. For Lula, these differences lead to a clash between both cultures (*Choque de ambas culturas; crash between the two cultures*). In the midst of a 'typical' Christmas dinner, Lula mentions an 'a-typical ingredient': Mr. Banerji from Asia (*Ingrediente*

Table 1. Levels of cultural understanding.

Level	Naranja-lima			Cat's Eye			Desert Wife		
	Reading response	Visual repre-sentation	Interview	Reading response	Visual repre-sentation	Interview	Reading response	Visual repre-sentation	Interview
Choice between levels 0 and 1									
Level 0. Omission	4	2		2			2	1	
Level 1. Perception of cultural differences	6	8	10	8	10	10	8	9	10
Choice among levels 2, 3, 4, 5									
Level 2. Own culture from inside									
Level 3. Another culture from outside	3	1	3	1			2	2	2
Level 4. Another culture from inside	2	3	3	2	2	1	4	4	4
Level 4+. Evidence of levels 4 & 5	4	6	4	5	7	7	2	3	1
Level 5. Own culture from outside	1			2	1	2	2	1	3

Note: Numbers represent number of participants. Blank spaces mean that none of the participants provided a response for the items in question.

a-típico; Atypical ingredient). Here, Lula's reading from a stereotyped position becomes evident and is revealed linguistically through the use of denials, high-lighted in bold (*[Banerji]* **no** *festeja navidad,* **no** *come carne,* **desconoce** *las costumbres típicas; He* **doesn't** *celebrate Christmas, he* **doesn't** *eat meat, he* **doesn't** *know what typical customs are*). These denials reflect Lula's assumptions regarding Christmas. Considering that denials are used to specify what one takes for granted in a certain context (Pagano 1994), Lula's use of negatives here means that she expects people in general to know about Christmas and its customs but Banerji does not.

Data 1. Lula, visual representation, *Cat's Eye*.

English translation of Data 1.

INTERCULTURALITY → Different beliefs

Different customs

Different cosmovisions

In the text

Typical Christmas dinner → Family reunion

Turkey

A lot of food

+

Atypical ingredient

Mr Banerji INDIAN → He doesn't celebrate Christmas

He doesn't eat meat

He doesn't know what typical customs are

Orient

May produce a

"clash" between the two cultures

however

Attempts at shortening distances (by both parties)

NATURE ← Finally joined by ←

Biology (The father of the family is Banerji's Biology teacher) → In spite of cultural differences, they converge at one point: human nature (represented by the vision they both have of animals: they agree)

Therefore

We can all understand each other in one or other way

Contrary to her stereotypical views of Christmas, simultaneously in the visual representation, Lula offers evidence of her ability to position herself differently and see reality from eyes different from hers. This ability to shift perspective, 'de-centering', is a characteristic of the highest levels of cultural understanding in the model, levels 4 and 5. For example, she begins her visual representation with the concept of 'interculturalidad' (interculturality) to emphasize the possibility of human contact despite the cultural differences that she had previously identified (*más allá de las diferencias culturales e ideológicas, todos convergen en un mismo punto; In spite of cultural differences, they converge at one point*). She concludes with this idea, which she expresses as a meta-cultural reflection about a cultural aspect of communication in general (*Todos podemos entendernos de alguna manera u otra; We can all understand each other in one or other way*). As the visual representation shows, this reflection is motivated by textual content and Lula makes this connection explicit. This sophisticated ability to reflect upon culture is also characteristic of the highest levels of cultural understanding as reflected by the model.

Lula then expands these ideas in the interview on the basis of the notion of clash of cultures that she had presented in this visual representation. Contrary to what she does in the visual representation, the key concept that she emphasizes throughout the interview is the difficulty of genuine understanding among cultures as well as the impossibility of complete understanding. This shift is evidence of the fact that different foci of attention emerged as the participants undertook the different tasks based on the same text (in this case, visual representation and interview). Lula narrows her meta-cultural comment now by saying that *ninguno de los dos va a llegar a saber si lo que está haciendo está bien para el otro o … es decir, qué es exactamente lo que tiene que hacer* (*none of them is going to know whether he is behaving correctly or not for the other person, that is … what is it exactly that he has to do*). This is an opposite perspective to that highlighted in her visual representation: the idea that understanding is possible one way or another (*Todos podemos entendernos de alguna manera u otra; We can all understand each other in one or other way*). She highlights the importance of taking the other into account (*Tienen que tener en cuenta qué puede llegar a pensar el otro; They have to bear in mind what might the other one think*). Overall, as this interview extract shows, Lula's ability to move between competing interpretations, to position herself on the side of the different characters in the story, to approach the text differently, and to reflect upon the role of culture in communication among people with diverse cultural backgrounds is again a characteristic of the highest levels of cultural understanding in the model (levels 4 and 5).

Data 2. Lula, interview, *Cat's Eye*

M.:   En la representación visual te pregunto por qué 'choque' de ambas culturas, 'choque' entrecomillado.

L.:   Porque…

M.:   ¿El contacto entre dos culturas produce un choque siempre?

L.:   No, porque *un choque en el sentido de que … hubo un choque en tanto ellos se sienten incómodos.* Entonces … es como que *no pueden llegar a entenderse del todo*, y uno … *ninguno de los dos va a llegar a saber si lo que está haciendo está bien para el otro o … es decir, qué es exactamente lo que tiene que hacer*, como que *hay una tensión*, entonces *un choque* en ese sentido, de

que … no es algo que ellos puedan … no desarrollarse sino … comportarse comúnmente. *Tienen que tener en cuenta qué puede llegar a pensar el otro.*

M.:   En base a lo que vos ponés te pregunto, que dos culturas entren en contacto ¿va a producir un choque?

L.:   (Pausa)

M.:   Según tu opinión.

L.:   No un choque en sentido negativo, pero siempre va a haber *un choque en cuanto a la comunicación*, porque nunca … *cuando tenés una cultura tan diferente podés llegar a comunicarte de manera … es decir, entenderte de manera completa con la otra persona.* Porque por ahí vos podés hacer entender algunas cosas, pero *tu manera de ver el mundo es diferente*, *entonces nunca va a ser exactamente igual la forma de tratar las cosas.* A eso me refiero.

English translation of Data 2

M.:   In the visual representation, why 'clash' of cultures, 'clash' between inverted comas?

L: Because…

M: Does the contact between cultures always produce a clash?

L: No, because, a clash in the sense that … *there was a clash because both are uncomfortable with the situation.* Then, it's like *they cannot fully understand each other* and one … *none of them is going to know whether he is behaving correctly or not for the other person*, *that is … what is it exactly that he has to do*, it's like *there is some kind of tension*, then *a clash* in that sense, in that … it's not something they can … not develop but … behave casually. *They have to bear in mind what might the other one think.*

M: Based on what you wrote, if two cultures make contact, does that imply a clash?

L: (Pause)

M: In your opinion.

L: Not a clash in a negative sense, but there will always be *a clash as regards communication*, because *when the cultures are so different*, *you can never fully communicate ... that is, fully understand the other person.* Because maybe you can make the other understand some things, but *your way of seeing the world is different*, *then the way in which you do things is never going to be the same.* That's what I mean.

Discussion

In general, participants were attracted to, or interested in textual content, regardless of its familiarity or unfamiliarity and notwithstanding the difficulty of the concept of attraction and/or interest. All the participants became engaged with the textual content. By contrast, Steffensen, Joag-Dev, and Anderson (1979), Lipson (1983), Rice (1980), Hollingsworth and Reutzel (1990), Abu-Rabia (1996, 1998), Hammadou (1991) and Sharifian, Rochecouste, and Malcolm (2004) have shown that those texts whose content did not meet the participants' cultural norms were in all cases harder for readers for multiple reasons. It is possible to argue that the three texts used here contain content that could be considered surprising or novel for some reason, consequently not meeting the participants' cultural norms, irrespective of their cultural familiarity or unfamiliarity. For example, the familiar and potentially predictable celebration in *Mi planta de naranja-lima* (set in Brazil and written in Spanish) nonetheless offered a different view of Christmas through the inclusion of elements which were totally incongruous with a typical celebration in Argentina, such as religious questioning for instance (If God is good, why doesn't this poor family get any

presents?). Almost all readers indicated that the celebration in *Cat's Eye* was strange because of Banerji's presence and the topics of conversation around biology at the Christmas table. In addition, the celebration described in *Desert Wife* could have been regarded as extremely strange, atypical or abnormal, considering that no participant knew anything about the Navajos. Overall, the three fragments used here could be considered as departing from these readers' cultural expectations. However, the vivid, different or unusual worlds materialized in some or all of the different episodes described in the three texts led these readers to sharpen the depth, criticality and reflexivity of their interpretations, observed for instance in the predominance of levels 4 and 5 in the model in all the reading responses, visual representations and interviews.

Regarding prior knowledge, some studies have investigated whether relevant prior knowledge facilitates text comprehension in L1 and L2. For instance, Abu-Rabia (1996, 1998) took into account two Israeli social contexts, namely Arab and Jewish, to find consistency in results with schema theory. Performance lowered with the texts that were unrelated to the subjects' culture, even though both Arabs and Jews had lived in the same country for 14 years. The results of the study reported here contradict Abu-Rabia's findings, as the experience with the fragment from *Cat's Eye* shows evidence of the positive influence of the penetration of the American culture in Argentina on the comprehension of the American-like Christmas celebration. Almost all the participants mentioned in their prior knowledge task that what they knew about a Christmas celebration in this context came from films, TV series and books. They mentioned specifically TV cartoons like *The Simpsons,* films like *Home Alone* and books like *How the Grinch Stole Christmas.* Despite the evident complexity of the social, ethnic, religious and military scenario around the Israeli studies, not in the least comparable to this setting, what is worth noting here is the fact that even though participants in this study were not immersed in the American context (unlike Abu-Rabia's subjects, who had lived in the same country for 14 years), the influence was observable. This may be related to a long history of tension between the US and Argentina in economic, financial, political, ideological and military terms, framed within the discourse of imperialism (Borón 2005, 2009; Borón and Vlahusic 2009). This influence may be worthy of exploration in the future.

Initially, it was thought that the *Model of Cultural Understanding* used in analysis in this study would result in the allocation of clear-cut levels in the participants' productions. However, the model showed the fluidity of cultural understanding in this setting, or in other words, the constant slips back and forth stages in the model at all times in the students' productions. This reveals that the assumption that people attain and stay on one level during text interpretation is wrong.

Sharifian, Rochecouste, and Malcolm (2004) observed different degrees of familiarity with the cultural schemata in the oral narratives that they analysed. Likewise, this study supports the notion of degrees of familiarity with cultural content along a continuum. The fluidity in how the readers in this study approached the cultural not only across texts and tasks, but also within each task, is revealing of varying degrees of familiarity with very specific portions of the selected fragments. Similar to Sharifian, Rochecouste, and Malcolm (2004), this study stresses the notion of a continuum in cultural understanding rather than the notion of absent (non-available) vs. present (available) schemata most often associated with the beginnings of schema theory (e.g. Lipson 1983; Harris, Lee, Hensley and Schoen 1988; Reynolds et al. 1982; Rice 1980; Steffensen, Joag-Dev, and Anderson 1979). This fluidity is revealed by

the use of the model in analysis. It is possible that previous studies (in particular, the schema studies reviewed initially) did not reveal similar findings simply because the means of analysis used, namely the quantification of idea units in recall protocols to determine the presence or absence of a certain schema, is inadequate to research cultural understanding where there is a dynamic conception of culture. Cultural understanding goes beyond the quantification of prior knowledge or background knowledge in the form of idea units as evidence of the comprehension process. In this sense, the model has succeeded in portraying a more detailed picture of cultural understanding and, considering the existing gaps in the field of the assessment and evaluation of intercultural competence, it is possible that the model, with variations, can become a useful resource in educational contexts. This possibility remains to be explored.

Conclusion

The study described here brings together, and extends, two areas of research, namely reading with a focus on culture and intercultural communication with a focus on literature. It does so in two ways. First, regarding reading research with a focus on the cultural content of texts, it abandons the quantification of idea units in a free recall protocol as a measure of comprehension and proposes instead the use of a model with levels of cultural understanding as a measure of analysis. Second, regarding research on intercultural communication, this study uses literary texts to investigate intercultural understanding at the point where the focus is on the reading process.

Overall, the most important finding is the notion of the impossibility to assign fixed and independent levels in a model to any reader's approach to the kind of cultural content of the texts used in this study. The point to be stressed is that of fluidity. These readers moved back and forth over the levels freely at any point during the reading process, showing elements of almost all levels in all tasks. The process of cultural understanding in this setting was complex and nuanced in ways that have not previously been noted in past research.

This article has also highlighted the significant role of literature in allowing contact with otherness, especially in classroom contexts and also in contexts where the options for the internationalization of education are limited for different reasons. In this sense, the article stresses the importance of the intercultural dimension of education by emphasizing the central role of language education through literature. The link with current research on intercultural education becomes evident in the following aspects stressed by the research reported here such as a dynamic conception of culture, an emphasis on comparative perspectives, and the contact with cultures and languages (different from one's own) through different means (in this case, literature).

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Notes on contributor

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